DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 708 HE 007 756

AUTHOR Pifer, Alan
TITLE Higher Education in the Nation's Consciousness.
INSTITUTION Carnegie Corp. of New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Annual Reports; Cultural Factors; Educational Benefits; Educational Objectives; *Higher Education; *Social Influences; *Socioeconomic Influences

ABSTRACT

In view of the widespread loss of public confidence in higher education, those who understand its importance and continue to put faith in it must be prepared to reargue the case for it. In doing so, however, they must start with a candid admission that during its great period of expansion the academic community did acquire some unattractive faults. Nevertheless, there is much that one can say in support of the academic enterprise. Such a defense can best be started with a reminder of the ways in which higher education's varied functions affect virtually every aspect of the nation's welfare. They may be roughly grouped under three headings: educational, cultural, and socioeconomic. (Author/KE)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

ED122708

*by Alan Pifer*

Reprinted from the 1975 Annual Report
Carnegie Corporation of New York
437 Madison Avenue, New York 10022

Carnegie Corporation of New York is a philanthropic foundation created by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 for the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding. Its present total assets, at market value, are about $240 million. Approximately 7 percent of the income may be used in certain British Overseas Commonwealth areas; all other income must be spent in the United States.

The Corporation is primarily interested in education and in certain aspects of governmental affairs. Grants for specific programs are made to colleges and universities, professional associations, and other educational organizations.

# Higher education in the nation's consciousness

Like many other institutions these days, higher education has become the object of widespread skepticism. After an era of unprecedented growth, affluence and exalted status in the 1960's, it stands very much on the defensive. No longer is it assured of the unquestioning public regard and financial support it once enjoyed. Increasingly, doubts are being voiced as to whether its benefits are not outweighed by its costs and burdens.

Some of these doubts are well-intentioned and well-informed. Others seem prejudiced and even tinged with vindictiveness. Still others appear to be part of a new journalistic fad of disparaging the value of college attendance. Whatever the nature of the skepticism, whether justified or unfair, it constitutes a clear danger and a challenge to the academic community to set about regaining the public's confidence as rapidly as possible.

The causes of the present disenchantment are many and complex, and range widely across the political and social spectrums of our national life. They include lingering public reaction against the excesses of student unrest in the late sixties, the disaffection of young people themselves from higher education because of the impersonal nature and tradition-bound rigidities of many campuses, the ideologically-based hostility toward intellectual, "liberal," institutions generally fomented during the Nixon administration, and, finally, the ever-increasing costs of attending college.

More recently, public disenchantment with higher education may have been associated with a broad sense of alienation felt by many Americans from their leading social and political institutions, based on a gnawing consciousness of the nation's mistakes and failures in Southeast Asia, its seeming powerlessness to solve its most serious social problems, and its inability to achieve a stable economy.

Where these misgivings have affected the academic world, they have taken the form of a sharp reaction to the inflated and overconfident claims that were earlier made in its behalf. Higher education, it is now being said, was overbuilt and oversold during its golden age of the sixties. The notion that a more educated populace would produce a more enlightened, more progressive and more just society was a delusion. The university's claim to a special capacity to solve great social, economic and technological problems was overblown. Going to college is *not* the certain path to greater income and higher social standing it was represented to be.

Given this general litany of disillusionment, it was almost inevitable that questions would begin to be raised about the priority higher education should be assigned in the allocation of scarce resources. Higher education has, of course, always had to compete with other public needs for its share of the tax dollar, and even in its heyday of greatest affluence could make a case that it was underfunded. Today, however, when the nation is still in the throes of the most prolonged and deepest economic recession in many decades, the issue of where the campus should stand in public funding priorities is infinitely more acute than at any time in recent memory. Indeed, it is probably higher education's greatest cause for concern today. Public officials all over the country as well as in Washington are now asking themselves whether it is morally right to be spending so much money on higher education when the cities are in a state of fiscal crisis, mass transit facilities in most places are badly underfunded, crime is rampant and unemployment at its highest level since the great depression of the thirties.

Still another doubt concerning higher education has become evident in the last few months that seems to have caught the public fancy. This is the assertion, made confidently in many quarters now, that a college degree is no longer worth a young person's investment in it because of its declining economic return.

It stands to reason, of course, that indefinite expansion of the numbers of degrees awarded throughout the nation would sooner or later bring about a decline in their monetary value to the recipients. And some widely publicized recent research does seem to confirm that there has been a substantial drop in the starting salaries of new graduates relative to the earnings of their co-workers, though more so for white males than for women and minorities. It also indicates that recent graduates have had to take jobs for which they were "overqualified," have landed in fields for which they were not trained, or have found no employment at all. The important issue, however, is not this finding, per se, but what one makes of it.

The researchers themselves conclude that the apparent decline in economic value of a degree represents a serious threat to the financial viability of colleges and universities in the years ahead since it will lead to sharply falling enrollments. In fact, they say, it already has. During the past five

years it has caused a severe drop—from 44 to 33 percent—in the proportion of 18–19 year old males enrolled in college.

But this conclusion does not take into account other factors that may explain the falling enrollment rate for young males, such as changes in the draft after 1969, rising tuition, and the liberalization of admissions policies that had made deferred entry to college a popular alternative.

One must remember too that *overall* enrollments in higher education have continued to rise steadily because of the growing size of the college-age cohort, increased enrollment by women and adults, and the temporary effects of the recession that have made higher education, at least for the time being, a more attractive alternative than employment. Finally, there is the point that, whatever the cost of going to college today, the cost of not going, if one wants a white collar job, is prohibitive as long as college is virtually the only route to such employment.

It is therefore not at all clear that the declining economic return of a degree to the individual is going to be the financial disaster for higher education at large that some people think.

Far more disturbing than the conclusion by the researchers, however, is the mischievous implication in the present spate of popular books and articles on the subject that the declining economic value of a degree is somehow indicative of failure on the part of higher education and is yet another reason for losing confidence in it. Such a verdict rests on three utterly fallacious assumptions.

The first of these assumptions is that because the relative economic value of a degree to the individual is declining, the general economic value of higher education to society at large is also declining. A moment's thought will show how erroneous this assumption is. The economic value of higher education to the nation lies, of course, in its research and service capabilities and in the trained manpower it produces; it is only marginally related over the long term to questions of the relative earnings of graduates and nongraduates. Only if the earnings of the former in certain fields essential to the economy, such as engineering, fell to a point where there was little incentive for anyone to enroll would there be a connection between individual and societal economic returns. And it would not be long before the unsatisfied demand for engineers forced the relative earnings of graduates in this field up again, thereby stimulating increased enrollments. In short, market forces would quickly take over.

The second assumption is equally dubious, namely that the value of going to college is to be measured principally in economic terms. One cannot blame young people for thinking this since college has often been sold to them on the basis of such a tawdry and selfish rationale. The appeal to them should, of course, have been made on the much more legitimate grounds that higher education helps individuals develop intellectual abilities, human-

istic understandings and aesthetic sensitivities that will enable them to enjoy life more fully and contribute more effectively to the general welfare of mankind.

The third false assumption is that the decline in the relative economic returns of higher education to the individual is necessarily a bad thing. It stands to reason there should be some monetary reward for personal investment in higher education in addition to the many non-pecuniary rewards, but this need not be as great as it has been in the past to provide adequate incentive for attending college—provided the true value of the experience is explained to young people. In fact, if the economic rewards do prove to be smaller, higher education is likely to be less a determinant of class status and less socially devisive than it has been in the past. This is good both intrinsically and for the welfare of higher education, since the latter's continued viability must depend on the support of the entire populace, not just those citizens who have reaped its benefits in their own personal lives.

In sum, while it may be true that a degree, in relative terms, is worth less money now than it used to be, it is utterly wrong to conclude from this that higher education is of less value to the nation and therefore deserves less support, or that its future is necessarily in jeopardy, or that it is a poor way for the individual to spend his money. Conclusions such as these are totally unwarranted.

The present popularity of the economic returns argument is, nonetheless, dangerous. On the one hand, by confusing individual economic benefit with economic benefit to the society at large, it gives public officials who are looking for a rationale to assign to higher education a lower funding priority just the excuse they are seeking. On the other hand, it may discourage young people from going to college who would profit greatly in other ways from the experience.

## *THE CASE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION*

Clearly, in view of the widespread loss of public confidence in higher education, those who understand its importance and continue to put their faith in it must be prepared to reargue the case for it. In doing so, however, they face some awkward difficulties, in particular the appearance of seeming blindly to defend a past which is by no means wholly defensible. They must start therefore with a candid admission that during its great period of expansion the academic community did acquire some unattractive faults. For all its great achievements it became somewhat arrogant and pretentious, lax in its intellectual and moral standards, and insensitive to the needs of the individual student. It came, furthermore, to perceive success more in terms of enrollment growth, number of degrees granted, the construction of ever finer new buildings, and the continuous expansion of functions than in the enhancement of academic quality—which made inevitable a sharp loss of self-

confidence and a psychological sense of failure when criteria such as these for measuring progress became bankrupt.

Nevertheless, having acknowledged higher education's evident faults and the demonstrable case for wide-reaching reform—reform, incidentally, that is now under way in many places—there is much that one can say in support of the academic enterprise. Many voices can now be heard attacking it and discounting its value; others are badly needed to defend it now, before the present wave of disenchantment goes so far that irreparable damage is done. Such a defense can best start with a reminder of the ways in which higher education's varied functions affect virtually every aspect of the nation's welfare. They may be roughly grouped under three headings: educational, cultural, and socio-economic.

*Educational*

The educational functions are obvious and should need little defense. They include higher intellectual development, professional and occupational training, the development of research capability and, most importantly, cultivation in students of a breadth, flexibility and autonomy of mind, and a questioning, even skeptical spirit, that will best prepare them to meet the demanding responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a rapidly changing nation and world. One would think that the importance of these functions would be obvious to all, yet many of our fellow citizens, including some who should know better, act as though they consider them of little significance. Suffice it to say that if higher education did not perform these functions, the nation's industrial, financial, educational, medical, scientific, and governmental systems, to name only the most obvious, simply could not operate at the level of sophistication and effectiveness required to meet our domestic and international needs in the world of today.

Less understood is the degree to which colleges and universities these days devote their attention to remedial work—making good the deficiencies of secondary and even elementary education. Higher education should not, of course, have to perform this function and should shed it as quickly as it possibly can. The provision of remedial education has been one of the inevitable consequences of the effort to promote equality of opportunity in higher education, but it is not entirely associated with that phenomenon: many traditional types of students also go to college with weaknesses in their academic preparation that reflect no credit in the schools they previously attended.

*Cultural*

Cultural functions are threefold. First, the American concept of a democratic society has come to assume the right of all to share in the comprehension, enjoyment and preservation of our immensely rich and varied cultural heritage. It has become higher education's responsibility, under the heading

of liberal education, to keep alive this heritage by providing an opportunity to understand it to large numbers of young people. It is hard to believe that as a people we are not the stronger for it. There is a popular book out entitled *The Case Against College*. The democratic case *for* it must never be forgotten.

Closely associated with this function is the role higher education plays as the actual conservator, custodian and developer of the cultural heritage through its great libraries and museums and through the continuous illumination and reinterpretation of that heritage by a handful of truly great scholars. The number of academic institutions capable of performing this function at its highest level is relatively limited, and it is simply impossible to overstate their value to the nation.

A third function under this heading is the one most colleges and universities perform in serving as cultural centers for the surrounding community. The enjoyment and informal education which the public gains—at very moderate cost—from campus art exhibitions, musical and dramatic performances, special lectures and other events, is significant in many areas of the country.

*Socio-economic*

Socio economic functions are many. One of the most significant of these is the role higher education plays as the principal device for channeling literally millions of Americans into a wide variety of professions and higher level occupations. It does this not only by training them and helping them find jobs but also by providing evidence of their qualifications to potential employers. This channeling and credentialing function has been much criticized, especially by those who would "deschool" society, but whatever its faults it meets a tremendous national need, and it is difficult to imagine just what we would do without it. It is certainly preferable to the alternative found in authoritarian societies of simply assigning trained people to jobs according to a national manpower plan—whether they like it or not.

A second immensely important socio-economic function concerns the discovery of new knowledge. High-level research is not a monopoly of the academy and should not be, but much pure research, unrelated at the time it is conducted to any purpose other than enlargement of the boundaries of knowledge, would never be done elsewhere. Sometimes this research is of only esoteric interest, but over time it frequently proves to be of enormous practical significance to the nation's economy, to its security and to the quality of life of its people. No element of the rampant anti-intellectualism of recent years has been more foolish, more indulgent of the emotions at the expense of reason, and ultimately more dangerous, than the negative attitude toward maintaining and strengthening the academic community's research capacity—especially in the basic sciences. We will surely pay for this in years to come.

Not unrelated to higher education's role in preserving and extending knowledge is the capacity of the campus to provide a protected environment or base for dispassionate criticism of the larger society. This is a function that has sometimes been abused, when the criticism has amounted to little more than unsupported political or social opinion, or when individual scholars have allowed themselves to become paid spokesmen for special interests. Nonetheless, where criticism is, as it should be, based on professional competence and hard evidence derived from objective study and research, the function is of critical importance to the maintenance of a free society and deserves strong support.

Two other socio-economic functions are closely related to one another. One is higher education's service role, in which it provides the administrative base and intellectual resources for externally-financed technical assistance programs in a variety of areas. The other is its role as the permanent home for a large pool of highly trained faculty talent available on an individual consulting basis to government, industry and non-profit organizations. Although, as indicated, the university's claim to a special problem-solving capacity became vastly exaggerated, and although faculty consulting too frequently has taken the form of self-seeking absenteeism from the campus, higher education's technical assistance capability, nonetheless, is of real value of the nation.

Perhaps the socio-economic function of higher education with which the public is most familiar is its role as the principal agent of social mobility and certifier of class status in the society, albeit with less assurance of success today than in the past. Much of the controversy surrounding higher education relates to this function. On the one hand, the opportunity to go to college has offered to many Americans just about their *only* chance to rise to middle and upper middle-class status, and they have seized it avidly. On the other, as more and more people have gone to college, increasingly those who have not have been implicitly, and of course, unfairly, stigmatized as failures. The blame for this dilemma should be assigned not to higher education alone but to the society at large, for its failure to create viable alternative paths to economic success and social approbation.

Closely associated is higher education's function as the principal agency for the induction of youth into adulthood. This has both its positive and negative aspects. Viewing youth as a social and psychological stage of life during which some young people feel the need to pause for a few years of personal development before making an irrevocable commitment to the adult world, the campus provides just this opportunity, and usefully so. However, as virtually the only large-scale institution organized to meet the needs of young people between roughly the ages of 18 and 22, higher education tends to attract some students who profit little from it and would probably, given desirable alternatives, prefer not to be there. If greatly expanded

open-entry apprenticeship opportunities, or substantial volunteer or low-paid service programs, or secure employment leading to productive careers were available for young people, higher education would not be called on to play this "warehousing" role.

Still another socio-economic function and one which is rapidly gaining in significance is the opportunity higher education offers to adults, primarily through part-time study, for intellectual stimulation, career advancement and personal growth. As the proportion of older people in the population increases steadily in the years ahead, following predictable demographic trends, this phenomenon will undoubtedly grow, to a point where some institutions may find that they have as many people over 40 enrolled, at least part-time, as they do under 20.

## *WHAT MUST BE DONE*

Looking over this wide range of educational, cultural and socio-economic functions, one cannot help but be impressed by the extraordinarily influential role higher education plays in this nation. Without qualification it affects the lives of all Americans—their economic well-being, their health, the environment they live in, their security in an increasingly dangerous world and many other facets of their existence. An enterprise that was once of marginal value to the nation has become central to its strengths, and this will ever be so. There is no possibility now of turning back from that reality.

Loss of public confidence in higher education is therefore nothing short of a national tragedy, for it is ourselves we are hurting, not a group of meaningless institutions appended to society but not intrinsic to it. The damage already done is extensive and it will be catastrophic if public estrangement from the campus is allowed to continue. The nation's fund of high-level intellectual capital, on which it is now so dependent, is far from being a permanent asset. Once acquired, it wastes rapidly if its replenishment is neglected. This replenishment consists not only of support for the great libraries, laboratories and museums, the research that goes on in them, and the identification and advanced training of particularly talented students. It also consists of maintaining and strengthening the academic community's capacity to train the millions of managers, professionals and technicians who are needed in a complementary role if the nation is to make effective use of its high-level intellectual capital. We owe it to future generations never to let this precious fund and the wider structure that must undergird it atrophy and deteriorate.

As we look toward the end of this century, we see two possible futures for higher education. The first is a strong, diversified system of academic institutions, ranging from world class universities to locally oriented two-year colleges, all reaching a high degree of excellence in their varied missions, flexible enough to accommodate a pluralistic American population. The

other is an array of stagnant institutions, plagued by low morale, unable to meet the demands of society, with few, if any, commanding international respect. The outcome can be the former or the latter according to what we determine it will be. Unfortunately, the process of making that decision—by default—in favor of a negative vision of the future is already under way. It will only be reversed if a new consensus can be developed in regard to the position higher education should occupy in our scale of national priorities and values.

It is hard to see how such a consensus is to be attained without strong leadership from Washington. We are presently in what might be called a period of modest thaw after the long freeze in White House relations with the academic world, in which the President has made visits to several campuses. These conciliatory gestures are most welcome, but they are hardly enough. What is needed now is a clear demonstration by the nation's highest political leadership, both in Congress and in the administration, of its awareness of higher education's importance to all Americans and a strong avowal of confidence in it.

The framework of a sensible federal program for the support of higher education is largely in place as the result of steps that have been taken over past years, although some parts of it are seriously underfunded and in other places supplemental actions and modifications are needed. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education has recently made a series of proposals for such changes in a statement entitled *The Federal Role in Post-Secondary Education, Unfinished Business 1975–1980.*

Approaching the matter in a way that differs only slightly from that taken by the Council, one can list seven priorities for federal aid. These are:

- A generous program of support for graduate students.
- The support of advanced research, on a basis of competitive quality.
- Special grants for major research libraries and museums, both those that are university related and those that are independent.
- The support of medical and other health-related training.
- Strengthening of higher education's international dimension through the support of special language and area studies programs, research and educational exchange.
- Maintenance of the existing special fund for assistance to experimental undertakings within higher education.
- Provision of the funds necessary to make equality of opportunity in higher education a reality.

Also highly desirable would be the program of tuition-equalization grants proposed by the Carnegie Council as a form of basic assistance to private institutions.

The principal responsibility for higher education, however, continues to

lie with the states. They have an enormous stake in it as the source of the trained people needed to maintain healthy economies and to provide necessary governmental and social services to their residents. On balance, the states have done a good job with higher education and until recently their support of it has held up extremely well. Nowhere, however, does the negative attitude toward higher education seem to be greater today than among some elected state officials. The harshness of the criticisms one hears from them, especially in reference to the faculty, can be quite shocking. In certain states there seems to be an outright determination by legislators to reduce their great public universities from hard-won national and international ranking back to the status of purely local or, at best, regional institutions.

Nothing could be more short-sighted than this kind of negativism, yet turning it around will not be easy, so pervasive is it and so deeply is it now entrenched. A positive new attitude from Washington could, as indicated, make a considerable difference but may not be enough. Ways may also have to be found in particular states to arouse public opinion, perhaps through the creation of voluntary citizen movements. Those state officials who do continue to support higher education will also have to exert more leadership.

The same kind of negativism that characterizes many public officials is also evident in the business community. There one finds a deep resentment at what is considered to be a prevailing bias among faculty members and students against the corporate world, indeed against the "free enterprise system." For their part, many members of the academic community believe that recent disclosures of illegal or improper corporate activities do give them good cause to be suspicious of business, and some faculty and students unquestionably do have basic doubts about the capacity of the present economic system to produce a just society. Nevertheless, on neither side is the perception of the other wholly justified. There is, in fact, a wide range of economic and political opinion within the academic community, and of course many corporations have certainly not been guilty of any wrongdoing and have, indeed, demonstrated a clear sense of social responsibility. A certain amount of tension between the business and academic communities is understandable and not necessarily a bad thing. The estrangement may, however, have reached a point today where it is injurious to the welfare of both parties and contrary to the national interest. On its side, business is heavily dependent on higher education for the research and trained manpower it produces, whereas higher education badly needs the business community's moral and financial support.

## *FORGING A NEW CONSENSUS*

If a new consensus regarding the position of higher education in American life is to emerge, there is much that academic institutions themselves can do to assist.

First, they must stop trying to sell higher education to potential students on the grounds primarily of its economic benefits. This simply plays into the hands of those who are saying that the economic returns are no longer worth the investment. Colleges and universities should instead be stressing to students the many non-pecuniary benefits of the experience. To the public they must do a much better job of explaining the wide variety of functions performed by higher education. The more effective they can be in demonstrating the broad public interest in what they are about the less they will be in the unhappy position of always seeming to plead a special self-interest.

Secondly, higher educational institutions must continue to press ahead with the administrative and educational reforms on which they are now embarked. Every effort must be made to pare away unnecessary expense. Unproductive activities must be dropped. Existing resources must, in some cases, be diverted from their present uses to meet newly identified public needs. In this kind of restructuring, however, the liberal arts, which are the very heart of higher education, must be neither jettisoned nor deemphasized. There may well be fewer students who feel that it is in their interest to graduate with majors in certain disciplines, but it ought to be mandatory for all students, whatever their majors, to include a generous portion of liberal education in meeting the requirements for their degrees. We dare not turn out narrowly trained graduates who lack the breadth and flexibility of mind that will be required for intelligent decision-making in a rapidly changing world.

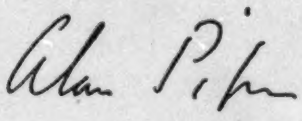
The most important task ahead for the academic community is to cut costs while at the same time preserving or even improving quality. Cost-cutting should not be designed just to save institutional expense but to effect real savings for students, parents and taxpayers. One way to accomplish this, although it does not help institutional budgets unless enrollments are increased, is to reduce the length of time required to gain degrees by better articulation of secondary, undergraduate and graduate education as well as by improved organization of degree courses. The savings, if this new policy were to become general, would be considerable. A number of experiments are being carried out now in various parts of the country to see how the time required to gain degrees can be reduced without depreciating—and perhaps even enhancing—their value. Successful efforts to cut the cost of higher education by shortening its duration may prove to be one of the most helpful steps the academic community can take to regain public approbation and support. Two cautions, however, must always be kept in mind if this movement grows: time-shortened degrees are by no means appropriate for all students, and they should never be achieved at the expense of reducing or abandoning the breadth of study necessary to produce a truly educated person.

Another area for consideration is that of faculty productivity. Some of the complaints being heard about low teaching loads are grossly distorted and

unfair. Nonetheless, evidence from a recent national survey of faculty indicates that the great majority of scholarly research and publication is done by a small minority of the professoriate. Clearly this raises the awkward question of whether some faculty members should have their teaching loads set on the assumption that they are doing research and writing they never have done and probably never will do.

Finally, higher education should review every aspect of its operations—its governance, administration, teaching, research, student life and external service—to be certain that in a moral sense it really does qualify for public trust and approval. For trustees and regents this means individual attention to the best interests of the institutions they are supposed to be serving and the elimination of self-interest in all its varied and subtle forms. For administrators it means constant alertness to see that the highest ethical standards are adhered to in every facet of institutional life. For faculty it means a greater devotion of the welfare of the institutions that employ them and to the best interests of students, as well as increased attention to moral values and ethical issues in their teaching. For students it means greater tolerance for the opinions and mores of other groups in the society. One cannot stress too heavily this need to strengthen the moral dimension of academic life, for renewal and growth in this realm is the very heart of the reform higher education must undergo if it is to regain wide public regard.

The building of a new consensus about the place of higher education in our national life, and reversal of the present negativism toward it, is an enormous task, involving public officials, leading citizens, young people, the general public and, most of all, academic institutions themselves. No one can promise that this urgent undertaking will succeed. If it does not, however, it will not be higher education alone but the entire nation that will be at risk, for what is at stake is no less than this.



President